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Abstract

This literature review examines the findings of various authors on the topics of family structure and educational success. By examining the dynamics of income, gender, and parental involvement within both single-parent and step-parent families, we are able to better understand how those three dynamics vary between both single- and step-parent families and may cause differences academically for children living in those family structures. Reviewing the literature, we are able to determine that there are differences between single- and step-parent families in terms of income, gender, and parental involvement. Unclear though, is whether or not, over time, it is most beneficial to a child's academics to have a step-parent in addition to their one biological parent, or if that parent should remain single. Further research is needed on this topic in order to be better implicated into society by means of parental awareness, or mentoring programs within schools and communities.

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ABSTRACT

This literature review examines the findings of various authors on the topics of family structure and educational success. By examining the dynamics of income, gender, and parental involvement within both single-parent and step-parent families, we are able to better understand how those three dynamics vary between both single- and step-parent families and may cause differences academically for children living in those family structures. Reviewing the literature, we are able to determine that there are differences between single- and step-parent families in terms of income, gender, and parental involvement. Unclear though, is whether or not, over time, it is most beneficial to a child's academics to have a step-parent in addition to their one biological parent, or if that parent should remain single. Further research is needed on this topic in order to be better implicated into society by means of parental awareness, or mentoring programs within schools and communities.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to explore the differences there are educationally amongst children who live in single-parent families and step-parent families. The questions which I am projecting to answer are: What academic differences can be found in students living in step-parent and single-parent family structures; is one generally more beneficial than the other? And, what elements within those structures are commonly different and why might those elemental differences affect education? I propose that income, gender, and parental involvement will all contribute to whether remarriage is more beneficial to a child, in terms of education, compared to remaining a single parent.

This topic has such sociological relevance that there are many reasons to want to explore it. To start, each human being is brought up in some type of family setting. Those settings which we are each brought up in set the foundation for how one will not only view, but interact within society. For that reason alone, it is important to explore the differences amongst different family structures. Secondly, education is an institution within society, often used to rank people. Through both formal and informal education, people learn in accordance to their settings and available resources. Additionally, it is commonly known that what is thought to be the "traditional" two-parent family has steadily declined in the last couple of decades.

Statistically, half of all marriages will eventually end in divorce, leaving one-million children per year with the experience of divorce (Bogges 1998:220). This has undoubtedly changed society as a result. Lastly, there are movements amongst public policy makers which encourage single-mothers, especially those with fewer resources, to remarry for the benefits that a child is believed to receive from such actions (Shaff et al 2008:700; Wagmiller et al 2010:220). It is particularly important to explore this topic because of the common conceptions behind such public policies.

Drawing from various forms of literature, it is important to create uniform definitions for terms used throughout this review. For example, education is measured throughout this review by academic achievement. The measurement of academic achievement, however, varies between the different literatures. In most cases, it is measured by standardized test scores, but in other cases may be measured by grade point average, graduation rates, or general attitudes towards education. The review also draws upon a number of different family structures that are important to identify. An intact family consists of a two-parent, biological family. A family is considered divorced when there is legal separation between the two biological parents. Biological parents could also be separated or never-married, however, very little of the literature takes these family structures into account. A single-parent family consists of only one biological parent present in the child's life. It is important to note that almost all of the literature reviewed chose to disregard data collected on single-fathers because of infrequency. For that reason, I will only focus on single mothers. Lastly, is the step-parent (remarried) family structure, which describes a family in which there is a biological parent married to a non-biological step-parent. Again, because of the lack of data collected on single-dads, the step-families that I discuss will only focus on biological mothers and step-fathers. Within this review, income is generally measured by the monetary resources earned within a family; however, some literature took into account low-income aid. Transitions are the moves that a child makes when they go from living within one family structure to another—such as when one's parents' divorce. A family can be categorized as disrupted if they have moved through one or more transitions; otherwise, they are considered a non-disrupted family.

The purpose of this literature review will be to examine the differences that numerous authors have found between income, gender, and parental involvement, dependent on family structure—specifically, single-parent and step-parent families. Within this review, remarriage could be treated as an independent variable which has an effect on education; however, this review will examine how the independent variables of income, gender, and parental involvement vary between family structures with the overall purpose of determining whether or not it is beneficial to remarry from a single-parent family status. I will continue this review by examining the findings on income, gender, and parental involvement in order to draw a conclusion on whether it is most beneficial to remain a single-parent or remarry, based on the authors' literature. After doing so, I will then propose implications and future research, based off of the findings.

INCOME

William H. Jeynes (1997:385, 1998:80, 2008:77), of the University of Chicago, introduces a rather common misconception amongst educators based on a child's family structure. He says that educators recognize those in divorced or single-parent family structures as being potentially more prone to having difficulties academically, but do not recognize those students which live in step-parent families. Naturally, many educators believe that because there is a second adult in the family, that there is a second source of income, more resources, and another person who will automatically support and provide for the student. However, Jeynes points out that this is not necessarily true.

In fact, Scott Boggess (1998), of Georgetown University, also points out that the income from a step-father may have little effect on the resources provided towards a child's education for a couple of different reasons (p. 207). To start, a step-father has no legal obligations to provide to a step-child and in some cases will not feel obligated to. Secondly, step-families go through a period of adjustment from being a single-parent family; within that time, a step-father may not be financially capable of contributing further resources which would go on to benefit the child's education. Boggess finds that, statistically, following the re-marriage of a mother, the natural father will lower his contribution. Legally, a father paying child support would need to continue doing so, but in the other ways a father can contribute to a child's education (such as paying for an extra-curricular activity) he may take on the mindset that the step-father is there and can just as easily take on that responsibility.

Even before remarriage, 50% of single mothers live below the poverty line (Boggess 1998:207). According to the Social Capital Theory (Shriner et al 2010), the more resources that are available to a child, the better they will do academically (p. 459). The main resource that all authors who discuss monetary benefits pointed out as being most important, was income itself. All of the literature actually agrees that there is a positive correlation between income and education (Boggess 1998; Jeynes 1998; Jeynes 2002; Sun and Li 2011). Interestingly though, Boggess (1998) finds that there is a stronger positive influence on education with the more money a family earns through a job, whereas there is a stronger negative influence on education with the more money a family earns from welfare or other aid programs (p. 220).

Jeynes (2008) finds that even when a single mother chooses to marry and the family's income roughly doubles, the academic achievement stays the same for children in that setting (p. 97). Jeynes concludes that this must be the result of other factors within remarriage, such as adjustment to having a step-parent, that overthrow the benefits of having more finances in a step-family setting. Regardless of family structure, the literature all agrees that income does have a huge effect on educational achievement. Numerous authors discuss the importance of controlling for socioeconomic status (SES), because of the difference it makes within the data. Yongmin Sun and Yuanzhang Li (2011) conclude that lower academic achievement could always at least partially, if not wholly, be due to low levels of income and parental resources (p. 552). In some households, parents are able to provide additional educational support to their

children, such as extra-curricular activities or tutors, because of monetary advantages. In fact, Boggess (1998) expresses the belief that single-mother families are only connected to low academic performance because of their general lack of financial stability to provide such additional academic support systems, and not necessarily because of their parenting (p. 221).

In relation to my research question, the literature demonstrates that income is an element that varies between the different family structures and has an effect on education. In reviewing the literature and seeing the consistency amongst the different author's opinions, I am confident that there is in fact a correlation. I am able to conclude at that this point that while there generally is a substantial difference in incomes between single-parent and step-parent families, step-children do not necessarily benefit educationally from that advantage when compared to their peers from single-parent families.

GENDER

Within the literature, some authors question the role that gender has on education. Barry D. Ham (2004) found that male and female students combined have similar success rates within both step-parent families and single-parent families (p. 174-5). In addition though, Ham found that when male and female students were looked at separately, males show a greater benefit from having a step-parent family compared to a single-parent family. Keep in mind that generally, the data collected is on male step-parents. This positive effect could be the result of having a male-figure in the household to look after.

In the case of coping with transitions in family structure, Kathleen Boyce Rodgers and Hilary Rose (2001) found that females are more likely to turn to friends for support, assumedly because of being more socialized than males (p. 49). In terms of academics, Boyce Rodgers and Rose (2001) determined that white female students, particularly, who have a mom who has earned a higher degree of education were most likely to be successful amongst peers academically (p. 49). From this, we can find the importance of adult female figures in the lives of female students, although there was no discrepancy between whether or not it is most beneficial for that mom to be in an intact, single-parent, or remarried family setting. It was not as significantly true in cases which switched either to a male student or father.

Most significant of my findings on gender differences within family structures, is the information presented by Herbert Zimiles and Valerie Lee, of the University of Michigan. They were able to determine which family structures most frequently have students drop-out of high school, by gender, as well as determine the likelihood of dropping out based on gender like and unlike-ness within a family structure. Zimiles and Lee (1991) find that male students are most likely to drop-out of high school when living in intact and single-parent families, when in contrast, female students are most likely to drop-out of high school when living in a step-parent family setting (p. 316). Additionally, a student in a single-parent family is most likely to drop-out of high school when they are living with an unlike gendered parent, whereas a student living in a step-parent family setting is most likely to drop-out of high school when living with a

biological parent that is like-gendered. This data was very interesting and beneficial in demonstrating the significance in not only the gender of the student, but the gender of the parent in relation.

In reviewing the literature, I am able to determine that there is a connection between gender within family structures and education. Specifically, we see that the gender of both parents and children within different family structures can affect education. In relation to my research question, gender is certainly an element to be considered, although I think that this topic could benefit from additional research, as the literature was limited.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Multiple pieces of literature bring forth the element of support, attitude, and general parental involvement in relation to education, and the differences in support that may be between different family structures (Boggess 1998; Boyce Rodgers and Rose 2001; Casanova et al 2005; Shriner et al 2010). Boyce Rodgers and Rose (2001) find that with each transition that a student goes through, their view of parental support goes further down (p. 56). Boyce Rodgers and Rose (2001) also finds that divorced and remarried moms are the most likely to spend less time with a child and show their support (p. 49). This situation can often be the result of needing to work longer hours, or the addition of work that may be done by a second parent in other family structures; it is not necessarily the mom's parenting abilities, but rather the need to support a family's finances and functionality, as discussed earlier.

As a result of having multiple transitions often associated with them, step- and single-parent divorced families are the structures that are most dependent on school attachment to create a positive influence on education (Boyce Rodgers and Rose 2001:57). Boyce Rodgers and Rose (2001) indicates that it is especially important for school officials and teachers to reach out to these types of students, as they may lack the support they are supposed to receive from home and therefore the support they receive at school remains the only source which school attachment can be developed from (p. 50). A positive correlation can be found between school attachment and parental support in single-parent and intact family structures. However, the author thinks the lack of correlation in remarried family structures is likely due to complexities within the structure, such as relationship dynamics with step-parents (Boyce Rodgers and Rose 2001:56).

Pedro F. Casanova et al (2005) finds that one in two students in high achieving groups have parents who use a democratic parenting style (p. 432). The democratic approach to parenting revolves around the concept of setting limits and rules for children, but still allowing them to make some choices on their own—it is a combination of the authoritarian and permissive parenting styles (Life Matters 1996). They are also able to find consistency with other literature in finding that students who achieve more academically continually report higher rates of acceptance, control, involvement, and expectations from parents (Casanova et al 2005:433). A last positive correlation found in the literature, indicates that the higher

educational degree that a parent has obtained, the higher a student might achieve academically, in general (Shriner et al 2010:461).

In reviewing the literature, all of the authors who speak to the effects of parental involvement are in agreement—there is undoubtedly a connection and a need for support and involvement in some form in order to build educational attachment. The authors found that different levels of support, attitudes towards education, and general involvement yield different results educationally and that different trends can be found within different family structures. Referencing back to my research question, I am able to conclude that parental involvement in educational matters is definitely an element to be considered within different family structures.

REMARRIAGE

Throughout this literature review, I have presented different perspectives on single-parent and step-parent family structures. I would like to now explore what the literature indicates overall about remarriage—is it most beneficial to remain a single-parent, or should one remarry for the educational benefits it will reap to one’s child?

According to multiple sources of literature (Boggess 1998:221; Jeynes 1997:388; Jeynes 1999:385; Jeynes 2000:141; Jeynes 2006:85; Shriner et al 2010:499; Wojtkiewicz and Holtzman 2011:516), even after controlling for income, having a step-parent has the greatest negative impact on a child’s education, when compared to other family structures. Jeynes (2001) indicates that having a step-parent even creates a more negative impact on education when compared to children who have a widowed parent, as a result of the other parent dying (p. 335). Roger A. Wojtkiewicz and Mellisa Holtzman (2011) build off of this argument further by adding that students living in step-parent families are least likely to graduate from college when compared to peers from intact and single-parent families (p. 516).

In contrast though, Kimberly Anne Shaff et al (2008) argues that having a single mom who remarries can actually be most beneficial to a student when compared to other non-intact families (p. 699). The key difference between the Shaff et al data (2008) and the data collected by authors of the literature with counter arguments, such as the Jeynes Meta-Analysis (2006), is the length of data collection. The data which Jeynes (1998, 1999, 2000, 2001) frequently draws from is the 1988-1992 National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS). Jeynes is able to draw his conclusions based off of six-years of data. In contrast, Shaff et al (2008) uses data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) from between the years of 1979-1996, and 1986-1996. While the data sets are each unique, they are each nationally representative—meaning that each should provide data that can be applied to the greater population as a whole. Shaff et al indicates that the idea that remarriage has a negative effect on student’s academics is likely a result of lack of data collection over longer time spans. Reading this literature opens up many ideas for future research, to be discussed.

In support of remarriage being beneficial to a student's academics, Robert L. Wagmiller et al (2010) concludes that it can be beneficial to remarry, but not necessarily in all cases (p. 220). They state that it is only beneficial in cases when the single-parent is at least somewhat privileged, compared to single-parents who are not as advantaged. They state that this is a result of underprivileged single-parents statistically remarrying to people who are in similar situations, which often times does not help the student in this situation. Secondly, Sun and Li (2011) find that both non-disrupted step-families and intact families consistently outperform their peers (p. 551). The key point to their findings is that these families are non-disrupted. Non-disrupted single parent families however, did not outperform peers. Sun and Li (2011) conclude that this was highly likely the result of less access to resources, as well as the lack of measurement of parents' dating transitions within single-parent families (p. 553).

In relation to my research question, I am unable to make a solid conclusion on whether it is most beneficial to a child's academic achievement for a parent to remarry or remain a single-parent. While some literature concludes that there is a negative connection, other literature indicates that there are other elements that should be taken into consideration that may show remarriage to be beneficial to academic performance. With such discrepancy, there is undoubtedly future research to be done. Until then, there is more to be considered and I am unable to fully conclude that either family structure is more beneficial to the greater student population.

CONCLUSION

Based on the literature, I am able to conclude that income, gender, and parental involvement all play different roles within each family structure, and as a result, affect students' education. What remains unclear though, due to refuting evidence, is whether it is most beneficial to a student's education for a parent to remain single, or to remarry. In relating back to my thesis, I am supported by the literature in my views on income, gender, and parental support, but do not have enough consistent information at this point to draw a concrete conclusion about remarriage itself. I was, however, more successful in answering both of my research questions: What academic differences can be found in students living in step-parent and single-parent family structures; is one generally more beneficial than the other? And, what elements within those structures are commonly different and why might those elemental differences affect education?

There are certainly some limitations within the literature which once uncovered could help clear up discrepancies. One limit within the literature is consideration for the length of time between a transition to another family structure and the time at which a student is part of a study. I, and many of the authors, feel that this can have a significant amount of impact on the results found in the literature—a child whose parents have recently divorced may survey differently than a child whose parents have been divorced for several years. Secondly, we are limited in that we are unaware of what age the students were when they transitioned to another family structure. I feel that this could as well have a great deal of impact on the data, as

parental divorce at different developmental stages may yield different effects. Examining the literature, many of the authors drew their data from the same pools, such as the NELS. I believe that doing so may contribute to why most of the literature is able to come to the similar conclusions. Also in relation to the NELS, as well as other data pools, is the limitation in relation to this data's age. I was surprised to see that many recent works of literature used data collected in and around the 1980s. I feel that this definitely limits our findings, as twenty to thirty years have passed since some of the data was collected.

To uncover the discrepancy between whether it is most beneficial to remarry or not, more research is needed to be conducted. In seeing Shaff et al propose that the length of a study could be a determinant factor, I would like to propose a longitudinal study that takes into account the time span between different transitions, and which collects data for a longer time period following those transitions. I think that with recent movements in public policy, it would be highly beneficial to research the effects of gay marriage and parenting, and whether any connections can be made with education. Other values that researchers may want to collect data on are parent conflict and values of education, as they likely have an effect. Lastly, I would like to propose that more research be done on the number of family transitions that a student goes through and how that effects their education.

Within the literature, and from personal observation, it is clear that not all cases of remarriage are the same and that not all cases of remarriage effect step-children in the same ways. With that knowledge, I would like to further investigate what it is within step-families that have high achieving students that aids in that achievement. As sociologists, we can determine that more research is needed to be done to show differences in age, transitions, and time since a remarriage has occurred, but we must go beyond the surface of this topic to determine what it is within how each family is structured and functions, that creates the differences we observe.

While it remains unclear as to whether or not it is most beneficial to a student's education for a parent to remarry or remain a single-parent, the literature is clear in showing that income, gender, and parental involvement play different roles within each family structure and affect education. Larger implications that could be drawn from the literature and integrated into society more, include programs for parental awareness of the topic, as well as mentoring programs in schools and communities.

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